

“Sense of Place and Sense of Planet”: Local-Planetary Experiences of Climate Change in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior*

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Abstract

Climate change has become a harsh reality of our present times. It is happening here, there, and everywhere unbound by the spatial and temporal dimensions. The vacillating impact of such a global crisis equally demands multiple and concurrent scales in order to accurately comprehend the complexity of the problem. Borrowing the title of my paper from Ursula K. Heise’s book, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, where she proposes the concept of ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’, this article aims at reflecting upon the globalization of the present ecocatastrophes, musing upon the local (the experiences of the working class people) and the global scale (Unnatural Migration and thereby extinction of the Monarch Butterflies) impact of the climate crisis. Ursula K. Heise believes that the ‘deterritorialization’ of the local knowledge is not always detrimental rather can open up new avenues into ecological consciousness. Giving consideration to a deterritorialized environmental vision my paper will fall back on Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior*- a novel dealing with the eco-apocalypse, climate change and global warming. In providing a deeply humane account of the working people’s response to the local effects of the global crisis along with a poignant account of the impact on a planetary scale- the Migration of the Monarch Butterflies and their extinction, Kingsolver in this novel contextualizes the micro-geographically bounded human experience and memory within the larger context of the global Anthropocene thereby calling for a ‘sense of planet’ along with a ‘sense of place’- which get along with each other.

Keywords: Climate change, Eco-cosmopolitanism, Monarch Butterflies, Global warming, Anthropocene

Introduction

Why did the one spectacular thing in her life have to be a sickness of nature?

(Kingsolver, 2012, p. 205)

Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* is one of the major works in the climate fiction genre with its pronounced description of the terrible ecological consequences of our carbon economy that reckons a global consciousness by continuously engaging its readers with the human and non-human victims of the anthropogenic climate change. The incidents in the novel involuntarily transport the readers from witnessing the climate crisis on a local scale to a broader global scale challenging Tim Clark’s notion of ‘scale effects’ that “in relation to climate change are confusing because they take the easy, daily equations of moral and political accounting and drop into them both a zero and an infinity” (Clark, 2012). Clark appears to be highly skeptical about the accuracy of scales in measuring the effects of environmental problems as “what is self-evident

or relational at one scale may well be destructive or unjust at another”(Clark, 2012) and considers that the zooming in and out between the scales in this context is not so smooth rather involves jumps and discontinuities resulting into incalculable “scale effects”. However, it is evident that as the impact of such a global crisis differs according to perspectives, one requires multiple and concurrent scales to accurately comprehend the scope and complexity of the environmental problems. Simon A. Levin in his article “The Problem of Pattern and Scale in Ecology” states that “when we observe the environment, we necessarily do so only on a limited range of scales, therefore our perception of events provide us with only a low dimensional slice through a high dimensional cake”(A. Levin, 1992).

Globalizing the Vision

Being a ‘deterritorialized’ global crisis that is unbound by the spatial and temporal dimensions climate change demands global forms of understanding. With the rise of globalisation as an organising intellectual term in the early 1980s to the mid- 1990s concepts such as ‘transnationalism’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ began to take priority. In the present times of a defining climate crisis that has rendered us powerless, Ursula Heise urges to develop an ideal of eco-cosmopolitanism or an “environmentally oriented cosmopolitanism” that involves ‘deterritorialization’ or detachment of cultural routines, identities and epistemologies from their ties to place enabling better understanding of how social and ecological systems function within larger global networks. Borrowing the title of my paper from Ursula K. Heise’s book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* where she proposes this concept of Eco-cosmopolitanism “an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary “imagined communities” of both human and nonhuman kinds”(K. Heise, 2008), this article aims at analysing the relationship between the local-planetary environments as portrayed in Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour*. This novel beautifully depicts what Ursula K. Heise calls ‘a cultural moment in which an entire planet becomes graspable as one’s own local backyard’(K. Heise, 2008, p. 4)

A global risk such as anthropogenic climate change demands the development of an ethics that acknowledges its specific global and temporal scales, the complex history of its emergence in terms of responsibilities and vulnerabilities and its socio-economic, political and cultural implications for the future. Heise argues that the continuous emphasis on localism by the environmentalists has ignored “how experiences of place change under the influence of modernization and globalization processes”(K. Heise, 2008, p. 51). As such a ‘deterritorialized’ environmental vision is required to open up new avenues into ecological consciousness. Developing personal relationship with those facing the consequences of this crisis lessens the distance between the issues we read about and their real-life experiences.

Reconciling the Local-Planetary Scales: Analysing Flight Behavior through the lens of Eco-cosmopolitanism

Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* adheres to Heise’s concept of eco-cosmopolitanism by exploring the local-planetary experiences of climate change, charting the interactions between its impact upon the ‘Family Territory’ and the ‘Circumference of the Earth’. It prompts the readers to move towards a global consciousness by enabling them contextualize the local human experiences within the global context of the Anthropocene. Memory plays an important role in initiating mobility of the human imagination scaling from the local/regional (climatic changes in

parts of Tennessee) to the global/planetary(migration, climate change and extinction). This novel encourages us to see ourselves within global perspectives without disregarding our very human, localised attachments. The very beginning of the novel juxtaposes Dellarobia’s personal life with the global transformations caused by climate change. Dellarobia Turnbow, the protagonist of the novel is the wife of a sheep farmer whose entire life revolves around “the Turnbow family land, the white frame house she had not slept outside for a single night in ten-plus years of marriage”(Kingsolver, 2012, p. 2).In seeking ways to flee her stagnant and dead-end marriage she plans a momentary escape through an affair with a younger telephone repair man. However, her life takes a U-turn when she witnesses a miraculous sight of the gargantuan swathes of orange monarch butterflies all over the mountains:

“These things were all over, dangling like giant bunches of grapes from every tree she could see. Fungus was the word that came to mind, and it turned down the corners of her mouth... The trunks and boughs were speckled and scaly like trees covered with cornflakes.” (Kingsolver, 2012, pp. 17-18)

While the locals view this event as a message from God, Ovid Byron, the Entomologist, puts the blame on a very different agent: Climate Change. The characters in this novel are portrayed as archetypes of every individual’s perception in terms of acceptance or denial of climate change. The local people view this vision as some sort of warning from the Supreme Being just when the Turnbow family was intent on logging the forest to clear their debts.Education plays a fundamental role in comprehending climate change and it is this lack of education along with the religious conservatism which prevent the local citizens from apprehending the true nature of the threat. However, this spectacular event opens up new ways of seeing the surrounding, approaching the economic and ecological difficulties with fresh perspectives and questioning the ways of land use from agriculture and logging to tourism and education. The arrival of the butterflies introduces the rural landscape to its inhabitants over again exposing them to the nature outside of their daily routines. According to Deborah Lilley “it opens the community out to the wider world, revealing the interconnectivity between environmental changes near and far, on geographical and temporal scales, and the growing urgency of recognising these links and their implications”(Lilley, 2014).

Set in a farm in the rural Tennessee, this novel initially calls for a local, place-based understanding of the impact of climate change at a state level.It opens in a domestic realm where the protagonist’s family is facing great financial debt due to their loss of hay crops because of heavy rains. As a consequence, Bear Turnbow is planning to sign a contract with a logging company that wants to cut down the timber on the “butterfly” mountain behind Dellarobia’s house. According to the regional and national organisations like the Southern Climate Planning Program(SCIPP) and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency(TWRA), increased flooding and drought are major threats in Tennessee resulting unto land erosion, loss of water supply and loss of species. While charting out the impacts of flooding and drought, Kingsolver very well brings out the real geography of Tennessee thereby illustrating the overlapping of environmental degradation and the socioeconomic struggle of the local inhabitants. By analysing some of the issues faced by the low-income sheep farmers the novel illustrates how economic issues are directly related to anthropogenic climate change in the real world. Dellarobia’s words clearly reveal how the unusual heavy rains have led to ecological as well as financial catastrophes:

“There was no denying the clear sky was fortuitous. If the sheep had stood in rain and mud all morning waiting to be shorn, some of the wool would have been too fouled for sale. A lot of income turned on a few points of humidity.” (Kingsolver, 2012, pp. 27-28)

However, the novelist sticks to her motto of awakening a global consciousness along with place-based attachments. The butterfly incident gradually becomes ‘the talk of a town’ thrusting Dellarobia in a strange situation where she could hardly find out ways to react. Her condition appears to be in resonance with the current climatic crisis which has expanded itself from the local terrestrial scale to a global scale. The very structure of this novel demonstrates an oscillation between local and planetary scales zooming out from an intimate realm to the earth and in again emphasizing upon both the importance of place- a specific farm in Appalachia- and a sense of planet- the mis-migration of the butterflies and the extinction of species. Alterations to the biotic system indirectly affect Dellarobia’s financially strapped family as they must now make decisions regarding the nesting of the climate-refuge butterflies on their property. The disruptive events in Dellarobia’s personal life is portrayed against the broader global disruptions of climate change and its effect on the butterfly species. As the novel progresses, her initial myopic struggle to recognize the true nature of the butterflies leads to her awareness of the realities of climate change that was manifesting itself in her backyard and probably beyond it.

On meeting the displaced Delgado family fleeing the same mudslide that displaced the Monarchs to Feathertown, Dellarobia’s apprehension of the Butterflies’ arrival as a ‘local’ phenomenon reorients into imagining it to be a catastrophe on a planetary scale. They inform Dellarobia that these butterflies are no ordinary ones rather are the Monarchs from Michoacan who hibernate in Mexico every winter. But surprisingly this winter they have migrated to Tennessee. Ovid Byron, the Lepidopterist attributes this migration to a “bizarre alteration of a previously stable pattern” that hints at a “continental ecosystem breaking down” caused by the anthropogenic climate change. However, apart from being a planetary crisis the diversion of these butterflies from their usual migration place has indirectly hampered the daily life of the Mexicans who earned their livelihood from working with the Butterflies and the people coming to see them: “Everything is gone!” (Kingsolver, 2012, p. 139). This reminds me of Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology, “Everything is connected to everything else,” as we witness the interrelation between the local and the planetary experiences of climate change.

Climate change challenges our knowledge about regionalism and as such ecocriticism’s presumed devotion to regionalism occludes the broader effects of globalism and planetary crisis. Antonia Mehnert points out that the immense reliance of the ecocritics on an “ethics of proximity” and “localism” prevents us from imagining the larger global processes and the larger forces affecting the very region (Mehnert, 2016) These Monarchs follow an unusual complicated transnational and multigenerational migratory system, migrating north to Canada and South to Mexico that is carried out in a multi-sequential pattern. However, increasingly heavy rains and a horrible mudslide (a local experience) have driven them from their natural habitat to the Appalachian Mountains. The biggest matter of concern is that if these creatures do not live through the extreme weather conditions of this region then the entire species risks extinction (a planetary concern).

Zooming out further Dellarobia realizes the global significance of the butterflies’ migration and how climate change can cause a species to be wiped out. This butterfly phenomenon demonstrates how the human and the nonhuman are not separate rather together form a part of planetary system of interdependencies that climate change is threatening to disrupt. The sudden flood in Tennessee that not only caused immense damage to the local inhabitants but also flushed out millions of these non-human climate refuges broadens Dellarobia’s perceptions of this global catastrophe. Kingsolver describes Dellarobia’s life ‘unfolding into something larger by the day, like one of those rectangular gas-station maps that

open out to the size of a windshield’ (Kingsolver, 2012, p. 216) when she realizes how the human activity is responsible for the immense destruction due to unusual weather changes. Dellarobia is shocked to find ‘clumps of dead monarchs’ appearing like another ingredient of the ‘flotsam washed down by the flood’: “the ground was completely covered with flattened bodies lying every which way, like a strange linoleum pattern” (p. 191). She realizes that the forest of flame that had lifted her despair was “Not just an orange passage across a continent as she’d imagined it before” but “a living flow, like a pulse through veins, with the cells bursting and renewing themselves as they went” (p. 202). She identifies people’s unwillingness to understand this crucial phenomenon with their anthropocentrism which is “all centred around what they want” and “think nature will organize itself around what suits them”, stressing upon the exploitation of geographical resources by the local communities for the sake of profit (p. 354).

Time and again Dellarobia voices Kingsolver’s concern for the impact of uncontrollable human activities on the environment. She contradicts Turnbow family’s decision to cut down the forests for clearing their dues when she says: “They’ll make it look like a war zone...a trash pile. Nothing but mud and splinters”. Though she is aware of the forces that push them to take such actions, she continually disagrees stating that sacrificing the environment might provide a short-term financial relief but will never provide a long-term economic solution. This again illustrates a juxtaposition of local unsustainable logging with the globally inflected impact of climate change that will eventually ruin the Appalachian farms. The people are most bothered about the immediate problems on a local scale forgetting about its consequences on a global scale. While the novel offers Dellarobia’s attempts to reconcile the concerns of the local communities and the cosmopolitan visitors. Byron, on the other side, voices the ideology of cosmopolitanism when he refers to the Monarchs’ behavioral patterns which shall render their transportation to Florida futile: “Its community dynamics. Not just the physical body...The population functions as a whole being. You could look it at that way” (pp. 437-438). Apart from conferring them with planetary memories, Byron locates this ‘system of local and universal genetics’ in specific times and places when he states that:

“For most of a year the genetic exchanges are relatively local. Summer generations breed in smaller groups as they move north. Some might fly only a few miles from where they are born before mating and dying. But then, in winter, the whole population comes together in one place.” (p. 439)

As the novel zooms out further Dellarobia becomes aware of her own position in the larger context of butterfly migration. She wonders what forms the communities and kinship systems. Thinking over the transformation of her life since the arrival of the butterflies she contemplates upon ‘the impossible idea of returning to her previous self’. However, admitting her discontent with her married life she decides to “end up back where all this started, launching her heart on some risky solo flight after a man” (pp. 471-472). These butterflies act as global players who violate Dellarobia’s locally defined life illustrating how emphasizing upon “a sense of place” may be counterproductive for environmental awareness during a global climate crisis. The novel closes with a sudden encroachment of a flood and the butterflies flight to a ‘new earth’ to “gather on other fields and risk other odds, probably no better or worse than hers” (p. 597), alluding again to the indifference of climate change to geographical boundaries.

Conclusion

Thus, we witness a continuous oscillation between the Appalachian setting of the novel and the planetary issues related to climate change illustrated through a reconciliation of scales of memory, knowledge and experience. In a world where everything is globally interconnected a sole focus on locality must be replaced by an ethics of connectivity that recognizes the processes of deterritorialization as fundamental in assessing the global risk induced by climate change. Such reconciliation also brings up the potentiality of human imagination to move beyond the immediate images of itself and engage with the non-human victims of the anthropogenic climate change. By offering the figure of the butterflies that travel across the national and state borders and effortlessly reconciling the local and planetary experiences of climate change, Kingsolver's novel emphasizes upon the importance of both 'sense of planet' and 'sense of place'. Though rooted in a geographically bound area of the rural south, *Flight Behavior*, thus, portrays an imaginative reach beyond its pages and the locale, scaling from the local to the planetary.

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